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# The Conspiracist Strategy: Lessons from American Alternative Health Promotions

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Are you aware the Government wants you sick? Did you know that officials hold cheap and natural cures for cancer in secret? Have you realized the CIA used viruses for preserving White supremacy? How many doctors would Big Pharma<sup>1</sup> murder until you realize they are only interested in your money? Have you heard about advocates for alternative solutions for illness? Did you know that those people and organizations risk their life for you? Well, it is about time. You must fight back for your constitutional rights of liberty. Fight back for your happiness and health. Be an American patriot. Buy one, get one free!

- 1 This, in a nutshell, is the 'conspiracist strategy.' It is effective, popular, and typically American. Scholars have indeed pointed that conspiracy theories have a strong grip on the American mind. Historians have typified a "paranoid style" in American politics (Hofstadter 2008). They also suggested that colonial leaders set those suspicious habitual tendencies on track even before Independence. Sociologists have added that modern America is awash with fear; cultural analysts have traced the effects of those conspiratorial fears in all manners of life; and psychologists have further clarified which individuals and groups are especially prone to hold conspiratorial beliefs.
- 2 This paper supplements those prior contributions by studying commercials for alternative medical cures. Despite its delimited niche, it exposes a general two-step "conspiracist strategy": First raise fear, then promise salvation. Commercials for alternative cures represent this well. They expose how entrepreneurs manipulate fears of secretive Governmental conspiracies to increase sales and promote alternative worldviews about health and sickness. Their strategy is effective for selling alternative medicines. However, it is just as effective in other areas of American life because American political culture creates a receptive suspicious habitus.
- 3 To understand this habitus and the effectiveness of the conspiracist strategy that manipulates it I follow two theoretical schools. First, I adopt Bourdieu's analytic strategy

for analyzing habitus and social structures (Yair 2009). According to Bourdieu, societies create a 'fit' between the habitus, namely action predispositions, and social structure (Bourdieu 2005). He demonstrated that a 'mismatch' between pre-capitalist economic habits of Algerian peasants and the modern ventures that engulf them gave rise to social change and conflict. Bourdieu applied his thesis of 'fit' between habitus and structure in various other studies, arguing that 'fit' stabilizes structures. In the present context I analyze the fit between the suspicious American democratic habitus and the conspiracist strategy - testing both in the realm of health and illness.

- 4 The second theoretical scaffold is Erving Goffman's analysis of Gender Advertisements (Goffman 1976). In this treatise Goffman showed how to think about gender pictorial advertisements. For example, he suggested that the relative size of women and their position vis-à-vis men capitalizes on habitual perceptions regarding gender. I follow his approach of analyzing texts to expose latent and explicit messaging tactics that the conspiracist strategy employs. I thus expose its language (e.g., dark machinations), its institutional cloak, its scientific idioms, its graphical supports, and the apocalyptic narratives that call for swift actions.
- 5 I split the paper into three main sections. I first explore the literature on the centrality of conspiracy theories in American culture. I then devote a section for analyzing the suspicious habitus, namely habituated predispositions to suspect collusion between Government and Big Pharma. To do so I review available polls, research studies and media discussions on conspiracy theories in health and illness. In the third and major section I expose the two-stage conspiracist strategy by exploring how entrepreneurs manipulate patients' suspicions of government collusion with Big Pharma. It shows how entrepreneurs tap on habitual fears from hidden forces by raising fears of Government collusion with Big Pharma. They then promise 'American patriots' that in buying their cures they win back their liberty and health. Through the analysis of various advertisements and campaigns I also render the barebones of the strategy: Presentation of ample scientific (if censored) facts, a cloak of serious institutional standing, and professional presentation of self. In the discussion, I return to Bourdieu's theory of 'fit' by suggesting that habitus and strategy reflect American commitments to constitutional rights of liberty and freedom of choice. This approach also provides scaffolds for comparative studies. It points for the need to differentiate between 'audience receptivity,' namely the habitus, on the one hand; and 'broadcasting conspiracist strategies' that entrepreneurs and politicians use for manipulating it, on the other hand. I close by suggesting the conspiracist strategy is not an oddity at the fringes of American culture. Rather, political leaders use the same strategy for raising suspicions about 'the deep state' and 'its' investigations of the presidency. They succeed in doing so because the conspiracist strategy taps on deep fears of covert manipulations of freedom while urging people to act on democratic commitments for individual rights.

## Conspiracy Theories in America

In the beginning was a theory, and the theory was conspiratorial. Before the United States united, American elites were incensed that King George III was encroaching on colonists' rights. This was no humdrum case of conflicting political priorities; the king was secretly scheming to strip colonists of their liberty and rule over them with absolute authority. A large literature sprang up to chronicle the king's covert

plot and alert Americans to the impending catastrophe (Uscinski and Parent 2014, p. 1).

- 6 Uscinski and Parent followed on Richard Hofstadter's famous essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," originally published in 1964 (Hofstadter 2008). According to Hofstadter, "There is a style of mind which is far from new... I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind" (Hofstadter 2008, p. 3). In this "paranoid style... the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy" (Ibid, p. 4). His essay opened a floodgate for analyses of the American infatuation with fear and conspiracy theories. Historians, political scientists, philosophers, legal scholars, psychologists, sociologists, and cultural analysts have followed Hofstadter's lead with rich and diverse studies (Arnold 2008; Fenster 1999; Goertzel 1994; Keeley 1999; Knight 2003; Knight 2000; Miller and Saunders 2016; Pipes 1999; Uscinski and Parent 2014; Walker 2013; Warner and Neville-Shepard 2014).
- 7 As Hofstadter claimed, American beliefs in conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon. The American public was obsessed with conspiracy theories already in colonial America (Bailyn 1992; Davis 1971). As later historians suggested, "The United States was born of conspiracy, real and imagined. Fears of ministerial conspiracy to deprive the American colonists of their liberty drove the Americans to war and, ultimately, to independence" (Critchlow, Korasick, and Sherman 2008, p. 1). Suspicions of secretive machinations have remained a rather stable mark until today (Brotherton 2015). Some scholars even suspect that fears of conspiratorial deeds have growing political and economic effects – to the point that Fenster concluded that "Conspiracy theory in the United States has poisoned our political system, culture, and public sphere to an unprecedented degree" (Fenster 1999, p. xi). Other scholars pointed that the media manipulates suspicions of secret manipulations for capitalistic motives (Altheide 2002; Glassner 1999). Fear, they suggested, makes people buy protections, making conspiracist manipulations part of capitalistic marketing strategies.
- 8 Cultural analysts and sociologists point that the American public is obsessed with fear and conspiracy theories. As one commentator suggested, in America "Fear has emerged as a framework for developing identities and for engaging in social life. Fear is one of the few perspectives that citizens share today" (Altheide 2002, p. 3). Another opined that "Since the 1960s... conspiracy theories have become far more prominent, no longer the favored rhetoric of backwater scaremongers, but the lingua franca of many ordinary Americans." Others have simply stated that the US is mired in "conspiracy culture" (Barkun 2013; Barkun 2003; Knight 2003; Knight 2000). A recent book captures this predisposition in its very title: *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (Walker 2013). As pundits indeed suggest, the American obsession with conspiracy theories runs across a wide spectrum. For example, many Americans suspect that the FBI covered evidence about the assassination of JFK. Many also fear the invasion of the Russians, while UFOs in Roswell keep haunting others. African-Americans entertain conspiratorial beliefs about the spread of HIV, while still others suspect that NASA staged the landing on the moon. As became clear in the 2016 elections, American voters were suspicious of Hillary Clinton and her collusion with Big Money. Many fear that the "Deep State" is after Trump, while right-wingers accuse Clinton and Soros of the murder of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville. As someone opined (with Constitutional rights in mind), this event was organized by "A left-wing operative at the heart of a false flag designed to spark civil war,

introduce martial law, and take away the rights of conservative groups to assemble peacefully" (see the report in the website Snopes, August 15, 2017).

- 9 According to Uscinski and Parent, "Conspiracy theories permeate all parts of American society and cut across gender, age, race, income, political affiliation, educational level, and occupational status" (Uscinski and Parent 2014, p. 5). Alleged to be fantasized and flawed, conspiratorial narratives have had real and at times appalling consequences in crimes, murders and bombings (see Uscinski and Parent 2014 for a review); they have also affected political campaigns and voting outcomes, and not least important – personal choices that determine health (Lamberty and Imhoff 2018), longevity and people's quality of life (Nyhan 2010).
- 10 Psychological studies of conspiratorial beliefs clarify the differences between paranoia, psychosis, beliefs in paranormal phenomena, and conspiracy ideation (Darwin, Neave, and Holmes 2011; Douglas et al. 2016; Galliford and Furnham 2017; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Imhoff and Lamberty 2018; Leone, Giacomantonio, and Lauriola 2017; Swami et al. 2011). Those studies have shown that the tendency to espouse conspiracy theories is highly prevalent across groups (Oliver and Wood 2014b; Oliver and Wood 2014a). Several researchers suggested that it is often related to powerlessness, anxiety, uncertainty, lack of control, and trauma (DiGrazia 2017; Miller and Saunders 2016). Recent additions have tied the sense of personal persecution with collective narratives of trauma and suffering (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). Uscinski and Parent summarize those psychological observations in stating, "Conspiracy theories are for losers" (2014, see Ch. 6).
- 11 Despite the variety of those contributions, Uscinski and Parent remarked that "Social science has not been able to confirm or deny a panoply of popular explanations for conspiracy theorizing, leaving the field open for punditry to parade as wisdom" (2014, p. 8). Furthermore, people are oftentimes confused by conspiracy theories that have been exposed to be real conspiracies. Bale (2007), for example, suggested that politicians and media giants often engage in covert and clandestine activities. Therefore, calling their actions 'conspiratorial' is true rather than fantasized (Bale 2007; Grimes 2016). Some even argue that while scholars may write on delusional conspiracies, adherents regard them as reasonable. Actually, the border between delusional conspiracy theories and real conspiracies is at times but a fine line (Dentith 2018; Hagen 2017; Kakutani 2018).<sup>2</sup>
- 12 This study contributes to the rich literature on America's conspiracy culture by exposing the "conspiracist strategy" that entrepreneurs manipulate in advancing their interests. It sidesteps current political turmoil by empirically studying alternative health commercials, and shows that this seemingly fringe area can teach a lot about the alignment between the American habitus and the conspiracist strategies that pundits use for manipulating it. I present the analyses in the next two sections. The first analyses the American suspicious habitus by reviewing evidence about the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories in health and illness. This supplies a context for the second section, which analyses the "conspiracist strategy" that entrepreneurs use for manipulating clients' fears.

## The American Suspicious Habitus: Data on Health and Illness

- 13 As Uscinski and Parent concluded about beliefs in conspiracy theories (2014, p.6), "The polls are not reflecting transient or trivial responses; the beliefs appear to be strongly held and sincere." This is true in the realm of health and illness as in all others. The American political tradition creates 'receptivity' for conspiratorial suspicions and this responsiveness creates ripe grounds for conspiracy theorists and their campaigns. This section prepares the ground for the analysis of those campaigns by providing evidence for the receptive suspicious American habitus.
- 14 Nationally representative surveys expose popular suspicions of government and Big Pharma colluding to hide natural remedies. Chapman University's *America's Top Fears 2016* survey sampled 1,511 adults from across the United States and exposed that more than 60% fear Government corruption. This survey confirms prior polls, which brought together findings from more than 200 national opinion surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University's School of Public Health, and other polling and media organizations (Blendon et al. 2011). This immense body of data consistently recorded little public trust in Government in what concerns healthcare. Other polls confirm the American public holds deep suspicions about the truthfulness of government in medical matters (Miller and Saunders 2016). In this representative study, the authors found 49% of Americans agreeing with at least one medical conspiracy theory. Furthermore, 18% agree with three conspiracies or more. The survey also exposed that 63% of the American public "Heard Before" the argument that "The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is deliberately preventing the public from getting natural cures for cancer and other diseases because of pressure from drug companies." 37% of the respondents agreed with the statement (Oliver and Wood 2014b).
- 15 Celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the landing on the moon, Time Magazine discussed "The 10 of the world's most enduring conspiracy theories," number nine being the belief the CIA and government scientists are behind the HIV epidemic. The CIA is allegedly seeking to kill African-Americans and homosexuals and to de-populate the world (Pipes 1999; Zekeri et al. 2009). As the article describes, "Rumors have persisted that the deadly virus was created by the CIA to wipe out homosexuals and African Americans. Even today, the conspiracy theory has a number of high-profile believers." There are many conspiracy theories about Aids/HIV. Those upholding them claim that it is a genocide perpetrated by the CIA, the Government or The World Health Organization (see sources in Sourcewatch: Aids conspiracy). These conspiracies, indeed, enjoy wide embrace by the public. A study published in 2009, for example, found that "27% percent of blacks held AIDS-conspiracy views, and an additional 23% were undecided" (Klonoff and Landrine 2009, p. 451). The figures for those actually infected by HIV are significantly higher (Zekeri et al. 2009). In offering an explanation for the fact that while African-Americans are only 12% of the population yet 50% of those infected by HIV, Ronald Bailey dispels the CIA conspiracy theory only to raise a different one. In an article titled "Government Kills Blacks with Aids Virus," published in Reason.Com – he explained that Black males are incarcerated un-proportionally, amounting to roughly one in every three. Resulting from un-safe sex in prison, the infection spreads among inmates – explaining the overrepresentation of the virus among Blacks. "Government scientists did not create the

HIV virus," he concluded in dispelling the CIA conspiracy theory. However, he pointed to another, arguing "A conspiracy of inaction and silence among government officials is worsening the AIDS epidemic among black Americans."

- 16 Public discussions often pick on those surveys while providing reasons for more suspicions about health and healthcare. For example, reports about the study above invited supporters to express their views. A respondent on a Bustle website adopted the common "greed" narrative by stating: "Cancer is a trillion dollar industry. They'll do anything not to get a cure to the people. That's not conspiracy nonsense, that's common sense." This post was re-tweeted or liked hundreds of times. Another respondent was cautious though supportive: "I'm not big on conspiracy theories but we all know they have a cure for Cancer and other diseases/viruses." As the Public Policy Polling agency reported, "15% of American voters think the medical industry and the pharmaceutical industry "invent" new diseases to make money" (April 2, 2013).
- 17 Proponents of those conspiratorial stratagems often express their suspicions with popular idioms. "If you follow the money, you will get the answer." Some insist that Big Pharma creates the illusion that a salvaging cure is around the corner to "pump money into the cancer industry." A popular debating website (Debate.org) supplied further examples for conspiracy theories concerning cheap or natural cures for cancer. About 84% of the respondents said "Yes" to the question "Is the government hiding the cure for cancer?" Indeed, respondents offered typical replies around two main arguments. First, the government seeks to maximize income from the sale of expansive drugs. Second, it has a darker aim to control population size. At times voters explain their support for those claims by offering a mixture of the two arguments. The following two excerpts exemplify this rhetoric. As one respondent said, "The government has the cure for cancer but won't release it because they would lose so much money." Another respondent wrote: "I feel strongly that the government, not just the US but governments in other countries know about a cure for cancer(s) and do not expose it because it is a means of population control." Quora, another discussion website that serves as a "place to share knowledge and better understand the world," posed a similar question: "Is there a cure for cancer and the government and companies are hiding it from the public?" The debate in this forum focused directly on "conspiracy theories about cancer" (money and population control again). Some professional commentators, including those who self-identify as cancer specialists, provided examples for how doctors and hospitals spread chronic disease instead of curing it.

## The Conspiracist Strategy in Alternative Health Promotions

- 18 The suspicious American habitus falls prey to a conspiracist strategy. Entrepreneurs in alternative medicine tap on the above suspicions of collusion between Big Pharma, the White House and Government agencies. They repeatedly claim that those institutes collude to rob Americans of knowledge about health and of cheap treatments for their illnesses. They raise deep suspicions about canonical medical information and drive American patients to buy alternative medications. They first raise fears, only to follow with promises of liberty and health. In doing so, they tap on basic constitutional commitments for rights and freedoms.



- 19 The following analyses expose how entrepreneurs in alternative medicine manipulate commitments to individual rights as tools for tapping the American suspicious habitus. Entrepreneurs continually startle the public with suspicions of conspiracies, collusions, and manipulations of information concerning health. In doing so they explicitly or implicitly reference American democratic commitments. They also signal who the bad people are, and suggest to potential clients whom they should opt to buy from (namely, from true American patriots).
- 20 My aim is neither to provide a thorough empirical sampling of all health promotions and organizations who participate in this market nor to provide an assessment of their spread and popularity. Furthermore, I did not sample promotions from an exhaustive list of all trades (homeopathy, acupuncture, or herbalism, for example). I also refrain from assessing the importance of those selected promotions within the wide realm of alternative cures. Rather, the aim is to use a select number of those promotions which best portray the cultural logic that underlies the conspiracist strategy. I also make the caveat that this strategy is not the only and, at times, not the primary tactic entrepreneurs use in alternative medicine. The analyses refrain from judging the trustworthiness of entrepreneurs and their claims. I focus on their pitch, not the value of the content.
- 21 To decipher the cultural logic that entrepreneurs manipulate through the conspiracist strategy I signed up to various health portals, which focus on natural healing. I also followed documentaries, read institutional self-descriptions, and was attentive to 'medical alerts' that Newsmax Health sent. I followed and documented a selection of those advertisements for three years (2015-2017). The data are commercial promotions that entrepreneurs distributed for the public. Hence, I kept names of entrepreneurs – individuals and organizations – as in the original messages as they were using their academic or professional credentials to sell their products. Finally, the author, a cultural sociologist, has no pecuniary interest in the realm of health and his positions on healthcare policies or alternative cures were irrelevant to the analysis.
- 22 The analyses show that the conspiracist strategy operates in a lock-step fashion. It first raises fears of government collusion with 'Big Pharma.' It then calls patients to regain their liberties by buying 'hidden' or 'censured' cures. While doing so, entrepreneurs cloak their messaging with scientific facts and present themselves as persecuted professionals who run respected institutions for the benefit of the public. They also employ graphic elements to concretize their arguments and use apocalyptic narratives to require swift action. At the end, they always have a product for sale – a salvaging panacea for body and citizenship.
- 23 The examples below show how entrepreneurs manipulate American fears from the machinations of Government and Big Pharma. After exposing alleged collusions, they call on patriotic motives, suggesting that good Americans stand cautiously against the plots of a rogue White House and Government agencies. Indeed, alternative doctors and organizations use the conspiracist strategy knowing that most Americans are socialized to hold dear the precepts of individual rights. Entrepreneurs use the conspiracist strategy for alerting American patients about governmental schemes and manipulations that rob their liberties. Their campaigns caution patients from the workings of government bureaus who intently ignore their rights for knowledge. They alert them to the trappings and manipulations of Big Pharma and their political lobbyists, who extort congressional representatives for money and positions. They expose plots to turn cheap natural cures



into expensive medications and complain against the White House, Government agencies and Big Pharma for being self-serving. After exposing the battleground for consumer health, entrepreneurs propose alternative sources of information and cures. In doing so, they motivate patients to be patriotic and join an important battle for freedom and liberty. By calling on deeply held democratic convictions and libertarian rights, the conspiracist strategy offers patients an opportunity to be good Americans while being saved from cancer, Alzheimer or heart attack – albeit for a modest sum of money.

- 24 Dr. William Campbell Douglass provided a clear link between medical conspiracies and constitutional rights. His book – *The Free Man's Declaration for Health and Longevity* (2013) – provides a model for how fear of conspiracy drives the search for alternative therapies. The cover of his book is a facsimile of the Declaration of Independence over the American flag, making an iconic statement about the affinity between personal rights and freedom of medical knowledge. He accompanied the book with media calls that emphasized that "Our individual rights come from God, not from the government," and that "In order to exercise your true First Amendment rights, you need to leave the US." Presented as an "Exiled American doctor," William Campbell's book "Reveals six life-saving medical secrets denied by our own Government" – offering the public the rights that the government robbed them of. His newsletter – The Douglass Report – offered the public warnings about "doomsday," while criticizing the federal government and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) for misleading the public. Upon his death, in 2015, Jack Harrison posted an obituary where he stated that "Dr. Douglass stood up to government bullies and billion-dollar drug company interests to make sure you'd always have access to the latest science and life-saving cures" (The Douglass Report, Nov. 2015).
- 25 Some health-related promotions push the "enemy above" type of paranoia to the extreme (Walker 2013), only to sell a product at the end. An advertisement for a product named NutriO2 opens up by reporting the 'mysterious deaths' of five doctors who practiced alternative medicine. It claims that all five were shot on questionable grounds. "Do you think these deaths are simply a strange coincidence or that perhaps something more sinister is transpiring?" asks the advertisement – couched as a report of facts. The text implicates "Big Pharma" with the possible assassination of those professionals, whose practice risked its profits. "Has big pharma gone too far this time? What were they trying to cover up?" By exposing the huge profits of leading pharmaceutical companies, the publisher, Kevin Richardson, attempts to recruit the reader into a quest for enlightened knowledge, ending with an invitation to the panaceas that those purportedly murdered seemingly had: "Think about it for a second... There is no money in finding a real cheap cure for any illness. They don't get to reap the benefits and recoup on their research investment. These doctors didn't have to die for nothing."
- 26 Accusations about murders abound. For example, the Health Nut News website reported in 2016 "Unintended Holistic Doctor Death Series: Over 90 Killed." Advertisements insinuate that "Big Pharma" is a mafia, and that pharmaceutical companies target competitors who risk their profits with a death sentence. Clearly, such promotions heighten fears, as they selectively pick up death cases while framing a script that the unsuspecting reader clearly understands without the advertisement actually making a legal accusation. However, being short of making such an accusation, it carries the reader into the dark world of organized crime. The strategy intimates that since the doctors took their medical panaceas with them to the grave, they left suffering readers to die with no cure. They leave patients suspecting that knowledge concerning alternative and cheap

medicine lies literally buried. This strategy raises consumers' eagerness to learn what they have missed. At this point, the advertisement ends up by offering a bottle of liquid oxygen, "Get six for \$199."

- 27 Claims about "A dangerous alliance between the government and corporate America" abound. Laissez Faire Books, whose American libertarian motto is "Freedom. Self-reliance. Action" sent an "Urgent public health warning," arguing that Americans are being denied the right to know what is in their food. In his warning, the publisher targeted food manufacturers who rely on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that are dangerous to health. "It's a conspiracy that runs right from a few massive food producing companies" up to the government, he argues, stating that "It's a tangled web of corruption that keeps politicians in power and safeguards the profits of certain corporations." Furthermore, documentaries like *Food Inc.* have exposed a "Revolving door syndrome," showing how top officials working at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) change offices to working for giant companies like Monsanto, or rotating back and forth between government and food conglomerates – thereby helping to write the regulations that guarantee corporate profits. Furthermore, entrepreneurs argue that big corporations fund scientific research in ways that raise suspicions about the validity and trustworthiness of publications. Paradoxically, this state of affairs and the very openness of democratic governance provide ripe grounds for collusion between corporations and government gatekeepers. They thus provide reason and commercial armament to raise suspicions of collusion and conspiracy.<sup>3</sup> Repeated actual occurrences of such collusion help transforming popular suspicions into firmly held convictions. As the advertisement concludes, "They will lie and tell you something is good for you, as long as it helps corporations make a fortune and keep government officials in office."
- 28 To gain credibility and legitimacy, advertisers often cloth themselves with similar initials as governmental agencies (i.e., NIH, NSF) – but unlike the callous government, they allege to provide 'true facts' and 'real science' that they screen from 'all over the world.' For example, the Health Sciences Institute (HSI) presents itself as "An independent think tank of patriotic American doctors, scientists, and researchers." Like other publishers, HSI promotions tap on the American suspicious habitus while repeatedly using strategies that pump up fear and a sense of lost liberties. "Big pharma does not want you to know there are alternative solutions to taking harmful meds," announced an alarming message sent by Jenny Thompson from the HSI. She warns the reader to be weary of the government, which conspires against American freedoms and truth: "Call it a conspiracy... Call it a betrayal... Call it an outright crime... But whatever you call it, please understand... You're being lied to." Miss Thomson continues frightening the listener for being robbed of liberty by the institutions he or she trusts. As she states: "I'm going to expose a conspiracy hatched at the highest level of government... a conspiracy so corrupt, it makes the IRS targeting scandal, Benghazi cover-up, and even NSA domestic spying look innocent." She then leads the reader through a list of Government- or Pharma-approved medications for cancer, dementia, diabetes, and other serious ailments while claiming that those medications are lethal poisons. Her message exposes "The list of seven most dangerous drugs" that Big Pharma developed for extorting money from unsuspecting victims (e.g., Statins). After discussing the lethal dangers of those drugs, Miss Thomson cautions the duped of being the prime target for the lethal 'arsenal' that Big Pharma uses for extorting money. After evoking deep fears of the secret machinations of government and Big Pharma, she provides details about alternative, scientifically proven healthy

cures. She offers the shocked and now suspicious reader salvation from this "betrayal, crime and conspiracy." After sounding a "medical alert," she goes on offering non-prescription natural cures with no side effects – cures the FDA and pharma companies have been hiding in the dark.

- 29 In 2017, after Donald Trump's election as President, the HSI continued raising libertarian suspicions while selling its products as panaceas for lost freedoms. In a new advertisement distributed by Newsmax (June 2017), Dr. Allan Spreen "Exposes a corrupt conspiracy involving Clinton, a secret society of gangsters, and other high-ranking government officials" who banded together to rob Americans of their basic rights. As he declared, "The people involved never expected the inner-workings of their plan to see the light of day. And if it weren't just for one *tiny mistake*... it would have remained buried forever."
- 30 Plan, plot, scam, fraud, stratagem or machination – the wording that such messages use varies, but they all ignite fears of lost liberties. Those advertisements tap on the American suspicious habitus and promise that if patients seek to be real Americans they need to stand steadfast on their constitutional rights. The solution? Read on and find the panaceas that promise to circumvent the plot against the American people. It is a question of life and death, they claim; it is a question of American patriotism. In the above advertisement, for example, Dr. Spreen accuses Hillary Clinton of being "A liar, a traitor and the conspiracy mastermind of a rigged election." Hillary's "cartel," her "cunning dangerous team," plotted to "Manipulate American politics – and the American people – for billions in pharmaceutical drug profits." Though Clinton lost the 2016 elections, Dr. Spreen goes on declaring that the plot is still in place, as her colluding mafia "owns" the FDA and the many legislators that vote on health care. Unless you pay the HSI \$74 a year, you might cut your lifeline short.
- 31 The Natural Solutions Foundation (NSF; the same acronym as the Governmental National Science Foundation) exemplifies the constitutional foundation of the conspiracist strategy. Dr. Lima Laibow explains the vision of the Foundation: "The Natural Solutions Foundation is predicated on the belief that people own this Republic of ours and that decisions that impact their very lives must be made through a democratic process in which their voices are heard and counted. That is the United States we believe in and that is the United States we are participating in. We do not warm to the prospect of a United States of America controlled and run (through lies) by huge multi-national corporations and deceptive special interests." She refers to the spirit of the American Constitution in explaining that "Thomas Jefferson understood that a free people needs education and the passion to remain free... Fighting for freedom and warding off tyranny is part of our American heritage. We see it as our duty to contribute to the vision of a truly vibrant America, and Natural Solutions Foundation and the campaign to protect America from CODEX is our way of contributing to our country."
- 32 The NSF advances a series of claims such as the belief in "a new world order," or that the government has a hidden agenda to de-populate the world. In a series of talks about "Nutricide" – the intentional destruction of our nutrients – Dr. Lima argues "Our food is being weaponized, it is part of the global depopulation and enslavement regimen. This sounds very very paranoid, until you read the reality, perceive the reality." In another YouTube appearance, Dr. Lima claims that "Doctors are being assassinated for taking on Big Pharma corruption!" She adds that "Well over a hundred of scientists have been murdered who were speaking out about the horrors and dangers of genetic modification

for the environment, for people, for our continued survival." She admits to being cautious in phrasing her positions because "We live in a fairyland of pharmaceutical, regulatory deceit and dishonesty." After mentioning endless amounts of scientific facts, Dr. Lima sends cancer-fearing individuals to her "Marketplace" to buy a natural cure. "Dr. Rima Recommends 12-pack, \$529."

- 33 The Institute for Natural Healing (INH, playing on the NIH, the National Institute of Health) also adopts the conspiracist strategy. A section titled "What We Believe" declares "We are fed up with the lies and stupidity of the medical establishment and are committed to exposing these falsehoods to the public. We are well aware of the oft-hidden relationship between the large pharmaceutical companies and the government agencies that were established to disseminate information about good health... and we are devoted to stripping all health information of any financial bias." In blog posts or advertisements, they continually make use of the conspiracist strategy. They exemplified it by advertising a simple cure to all major cancers, a cure that the government hides for more than forty years. The headline goes immediately to the top, namely The White House: "White House Knows This Natural Therapy Beats Cancer—Bans it Anyway. They buried the results, they banned all future research on this treatment and they actively declared war on it." As is usual with most such suspicion-inducing advertisements, they end up offering the startled reader with a panacea, namely defense from presidential plots against the people – buy one, get one free.
- 34 The Patriot Health Alliance presents itself using the conspiracist strategy as well. They promise to "Show you the health secrets that the government and Big Pharma don't want you to know about." The alliance – a health company that is dedicated to helping seniors to live a healthier and vibrant life – sells natural dietary supplements and other health products. The title of this producer (The Patriot) and the conspiracist strategy it manipulates pick on deep suspicions regarding the collusion between government and pharmaceutical companies. Similarly, Dr. Al Sears, an alternative doctor, advances health conspiracy theories in a years-long campaign against the 'powers that be.' In various publications and websites, he attacks the "Medical Industrial Complex" which brainwashes the public and hides "the truth" about risks and causes of death in America. He attacks the administration with no censor. He claims to have exposed collusion of criminal interests: "Shameless liars and thieves! For over 80 years drug makers have conspired with the American Medical Association and the FDA to bury the secret to heal cancer." In another context, Dr. Sears went on to quote president Dwight D. Eisenhower in his farewell speech – the occasion for his criticism of the scientific-technological complex and the military-industrial complex. However, according to Dr. Sears, the warnings of President Eisenhower against the "medical-industrial complex" have been hidden from the public, laying "hidden in the archives of a government building." Dr. Sears employs superhuman powers to break the secret, even though he suspects that the "powers-that-be come and shut me down." According to Dr. Sears, Eisenhower was actually the first victim among 950,000 Americans who die annually because of the medical-industrial complex. As he proclaimed, "You see, during World War II, while then-General Eisenhower was fighting for American freedoms... A small group of drug companies was working **against our freedoms**. They pulled their strings in government. They consolidated and grabbed market share... And they blamed excess fat and cholesterol in Americans' diets."<sup>4</sup> He ends his letter to his readers by stating: "In this letter, I introduced you to Big Pharma's secret plot to kill our beloved 34<sup>th</sup> President and

World War II hero. I showed you the hidden cause to the #1 killer of Americans." After pumping up the sense of conspiracy (i.e., killing of the President) – he goes on recommending his "outlawed cures for all diseases." His long texts are often accompanied by graphic elements which clearly convey how Big Pharma or food companies control the government and the media whilst extracting huge profits and robbing the public of knowledge and the capacity to act rationally for its best interests. Picture 1 provides an example.

## The American Parasite



- 35 Picture 1: A Typical Description of Health Conspiracy against the Public
- 36 Another Health Alert that Newsmax distributed employs the conspiracist strategy in exposing "What mainstream medicine doesn't want you to know!" Lee Euler, the publisher of this alert, continues by asking: "What if I told you that there's a dirty little secret that the mainstream medical establishment doesn't want you to know? That's right, the anti-aging/beauty industry along with Big Pharma could lose BILLIONS of dollars with this nugget of information." Hidden "suppressed information" that Mr. Euler holds would hand readers their liberty and autonomy back – taking them out of the dark into the light of freedom of choice. "Hiding information" or "blinding the people" are other idioms entrepreneurs use to describe the loss of free speech and freedom to acquire knowledge. I extracted Picture 2, for example, from a documentary about alternative cures for cancer, depicting a person with eyes shut and mouth sealed by the dollar bill with digital numbers running over the entire picture. Three syringes provide the clue that financial interests of "Big Pharma" silence the public and keep it both blind of the truth and unable to take action to secure their rights and interests.





37 Picture 2: Big Pharma Silencing the Public for Money

- 38 As Richard Hofstadter suggested, the paranoid style is often pedantry, with "almost touching concern with factuality" . Indeed, many advertisements for alternative cures arrive as e-mail messages leading to landing pages "packed-full" with information. Some of those promotions actually necessitate hours of reading of immense amounts of 'facts' or 'evidence' – as they bring readers "Loads and Loads of Information."
- 39 Another element that those health promotions employ is an 'apocalyptic' message requiring quick action: You must take action immediately, they warn the reader, else you lose liberty and freedom of action (see Barkun 2003). Indeed, the conspiracist strategy urges readers that "it's now or never" – that they have to take action right away, else their doomsday is around the corner. Advertisements employ this strategy to claim that given the power of "the cartel," "the mafia," "the dark alliance," or the "cunning dangerous team" – the publisher is actually in jeopardy. Entrepreneurs suggest that the government, Big Pharma, and big food conglomerates are likely to take legal actions against them. They warn readers that the proposed offer is unlikely to stay online, the product to be freely available, and the author to remain alive. A typical example of this conspiracist strategy is provided by a commercial that promises to cut belly fat within a day: "A lot of these big infomercial companies, supplement companies, and even big pharmaceutical companies are not going to like that I have a solution like this on the Internet. Especially at such a low price like this where everyone can get their hands on it... They can easily drop down a lawsuit, forcing me to take down this website and you will no longer have the opportunity to get your hands on this exclusive information." Your freedom – act now (for \$37).

## Discussion and Implications

- 40 The analyses exposed the fit between the American suspicious habitus and the conspiracist strategy. It made clear how entrepreneurs use this strategy in exploiting the American habitus in a two-step manner: First raising fear, then providing alternative solutions. While doing so they employ a series of means to seem professional, yet persecuted; scientific, though in clandestine. Their graphic means and apocalyptic narratives call for swift actions. They call on patients to be good Americans and act for freedom, liberty and health.

- 41 The analysis advanced in a lock-step fashion. It first identified the American suspicious habitus - focusing on receptivity or responsiveness. Surveys and polls presented the endemic prevalence of suspicions in matters of health and illness. They also revealed their 'feel' in popular discussions and suggested that most Americans hold medical conspiratorial thoughts of one sort or another (e.g. Miller and Saunders 2016). The second section analyzed alternative health commercials and exposed the conspiracist strategy. It has shown how the strategy manipulates American suspicions of government by alerting patients to the dark forces that take away their agency, their freedom, and their right for health and happiness.
- 42 In authoring their commercials, entrepreneurs draw on the same cultural toolkit that feeds the American suspicious habitus . Indeed, their conspiracist strategy is effective because it 'fits' this predisposition. The American suspicious habitus is rooted in colonial America. It feeds from the creed that vouched to defend liberty and guarantee happiness. Hence, the ever-spiraling homology between habitus and strategy drives American patients to distrust authority and suspect claims for truth (Kakutani 2018). Medicare policies trouble them because they fear the Government colludes with big pharma and insurance companies. They fear invisible yet powerful and greedy hands robbing them of their rights for health and happiness. The conspiracist strategy fits this habitus like hand to glove. It feeds it with supporting 'evidence' while offering salvation through alternative medications and therapies. "Fifty dollars, your health back."
- 43 The analyses of alternative health campaigns provide a general theoretical approach for studying the prevalence and effectiveness of conspiracy theories. Scholars of conspiratorial phenomena need to pay attention to the fit between the 'broadcasting' conspiracist strategy on the one hand, and the predispositions of the 'audience,' on the other. This fit makes many Americans susceptible to the influence of conspiracist strategies. Such strategies use democratic ideals like freedom and personal rights and motivate actions by arousing patriotic inclinations.
- 44 Notwithstanding its singularity, scholars have shown that conspiracy theories are not limited to the USA. Studies in the UK, Austria, and in Middle Eastern countries exposed that conspiratorial beliefs are indeed widespread (Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Imhoff and Lamberty 2018; Pipes 1996). Following the general theoretical approach proposed here, comparative investigations need to partition the phenomenon into three parts. They first need to study local suspicious predispositions, namely historical narratives of trauma and suffering (Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese 2011; Uscinski, Klostad, and Atkinson 2016; van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). They then need to analyze what strategies are effective in manipulating those habituated predispositions. Finally, they need to break open specific tactics of persuasion. A comparative approach may point out that predispositions are culturally distinct, reflecting particular histories and traumas.
- 45 Germany, for example, harbors unique suspicions from external Roman/Gallic/American interventions (Yair 2015), making it susceptible to conspiracy theories about giants like Google and Facebook.<sup>5</sup> In Germany, the dictum *Die Gedanken Sind Frei* (Thoughts are Free) serves as an anchor for susceptibility. The strategy for manipulating it would usually warn people from capitalist moguls who use various means for cannibalizing their privacy and thoughts.<sup>6</sup>
- 46 By exposing how the conspiracist strategy manipulates libertarian ideals in America, I made clear that it is part of the American democratic worldview. The suspicious habitus



and the conspiracist strategy both hinge on commitments to constitutional values of liberty and personal rights. Though manipulative and murky at times, the conspiracist strategy is part of the American democratic game. Uscinski and Parent (2014) clarified this:

In socializing successive generations, cultures may use conspiracy theories as part of a protective armament, shielding themselves from the tyranny of opposing groups. Inculcating distrust and vigilance would be adaptive behaviors if groups have been victimized by actual conspiracies (p.15)... A skeptical eye toward power is... not only sensible but also desirable, and conspiracy theories are the culmination of this attitude (p. 162).

- 47 Audience mistrust and suspicion do not attest to a deranged mentality. Rather than being a sign for intellectual failure, the analyses of alternative health commercials suggest that the American obsession with health conspiracy theories testifies to its democratic commitments. True, American democracy depends on the intelligence of its people. However, it depends no less on a culture of active suspicion against power and privilege. The conspiracist strategy manipulates this creed by calling patients to stand vigilant for their rights and liberties. Therefore, heightened libertarian suspicions testify to the power of political socialization in America. Recent years have demonstrated how the White House and alternative media outlets employ the conspiracist strategy in debates about the 'Deep State,' 'Invasion of Caravans' and other contested policy domains. They succeed in doing so for the same reason: The Conspiracist Strategy and the suspicious American habitus spring from the same commitment to American constitutional rights.

48

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## NOTES

1. Entrepreneurs often use the term "Big Pharma" in referencing large pharmaceutical companies. They blame such anonymous companies for betraying public trust. They employ similar pointers in referencing "food conglomerates," the "deep state," or the "White House" - all as conspiring against unsuspecting Americans.
2. Recent investigations of alleged Russian manipulations of Facebook - and the company's alleged conspiring to attack its critiques - have strengthened public fears and conspiratorial suspicions, blurring an already opaque reality.
3. There are honest and respectable doctors and entrepreneurs who battle on the same front. The Food Babe Vani Hari is a good example. Nutrition Facts by doctor Michael Greger is another. The confused consumer may find it hard to separate them from conspiratorial entrepreneurs.
4. A critique he shares with many respected doctors and researchers, thereby further confusing suspicious clients.
5. At times those predispositions to fear conspiracy prove to be correct, making it even more difficult to differentiate between fantasy and reality.
6. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2354651/STOP-using-Google-Facebook-fear-US-spying-says-Germany.html>

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## ABSTRACTS

Hofstadter's classic essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" opened a floodgate of analyses of fear and conspiracy theories in American culture. The present paper adds to those studies by providing a cultural interpretation of commercials for alternative cures. It shows that publishers of such commercials often use a "conspiracist strategy" in two interrelated steps. They first raise fears of government collusion with 'Big Pharma.' They then call citizens-cum-patients to protect their liberties from hidden machinations by buying 'hidden' or 'censured' cures. While doing so they employ a series of means to seem professional yet persecuted; scientific though in clandestine. Their graphics and apocalyptic narratives necessitate patients to take swift actions. By manipulating fears and conspiratorial suspicions, entrepreneurs promise suffering 'patriots' that by choosing their alternative cures they would win back their liberty and health. The paper discusses the general theoretical implications for studying conspiracy theories while calling for a comparative approach for observing local habitual predispositions on the one hand, and the culturally adapted conspiracist strategies for manipulating them, on the other hand. In contemporary America, for example, politicians and media outlets employ conspiracist

strategies to raise fears from the 'deep state.' They succeed doing so because those conspiracist strategies and the suspicious habitus they manipulate spring from the same democratic source.

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